Introduction

There are many different views of the onlooker to the society that practices fasting. In many of the Gulf States the society suddenly changes for a whole month; with the working hours reduced sometimes by a large amount, shops shut during the days and then opening only later in the evening, with people resting during the day and then over-indulging in food late into the night. The streets become very quiet during the days waiting to be awakened and vibrant around the time of sunset, when people are trying to shop until the very last minute of each night, and finally the night prayers seem to last for hours.

This booklet aims to explain a little about this paradoxical month; a month that appears confusing to the onlooker, but so very dear to the Muslim.

What Is Fasting?

Fasting is known to mean '*…the act of willingly abstaining from some or all food, drink, for a period of time…*' and people do so for a variety of reasons. Most commonly we see it as an act of faith but other reasons exist too; we see people on hunger strikes making political statements, there may be a medical need for a patient to fast for tests and operations, and we also find some people taking part in 'sponsored' fasts, abstaining from food to raise money for charity.

Amongst those who choose to fast for religious reasons, many world religions have a prescription for fasting, with individual methods and items to abstain from, along with different durations for times and days. Some religions actually ban fasting, saying they bring nothing to the people but hunger.

There are many benefits to fasting. Anyone who fasts will feel the hunger that much of mankind feels on a daily basis, for there is a large proportion of the world living below the poverty line. This helps us to draw closer to humanity, and appreciate that which we have been blessed with.

Fasting helps to train ourselves, for it is a time that those things that are allowed for us,during a normal day,are prohibited for us, and so we undertake some training of our desires, be they food, drink or in regards to marital relations.

Any medical professional will tell you of the health benefits to fasting, from detoxing the body, to helping with diabetes, cardiovascular disease and neck and back problems!





Why Do Muslims Fast?

"O believers! Fasting has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you in order that you may become more conscious of God."
(Qur`an 2:183)

In Islam, we fast because of the direct commandment to do so, as detailed in the verse of the Qur`an above. Although clearly anyone who fasts will get some or all of the benefits of fasting, Muslims do not fast the month of Ramadan or the voluntary fasts hoping to see the benefits, they do so hoping to draw closer to God.

Although in most religions fasting is seen as an expiation of sin or atonement for sin, in Islam it is primarily to bring us closer to God. When Prophet Mohammad was asked
"Which is the best deed?" he replied *"Fasting, for there is nothing equal to it."*

He also quoted God in saying:

"Every act of Adam's descendants is for themselves, except fasting. It is meant for Me alone, and I will give the reward for it…"

What Does It Mean To Muslims?

This month has a deep understanding for Muslims, because of the link it has to the scriptures in Islam. It has some historical significance to the revelations with the other books of Islam. In a saying recorded in the collection of Ahmed, Prophet Mohammad tells us that:

"…the Scrolls were revealed in the first night of Ramadan, the Torah after 6 days of Ramadan, the Bible after 13 days of Ramadan and the Qur`an *after 24 days of Ramadan..."*

So, we as Muslims understand and appreciate the importance of this month to much of mankind, not just the Muslim community. We believe that Allah revealed the other books during this sacred month, and the Muslims concentrate on the revelation of the Qur`an during Ramadan, for Allah tells us in the Qur`an:

"Ramadan is the month in which the Qur`an *was revealed as a guidance and clarification to humankind and a distinction between right and wrong"*
(Qur`an 2:185)

Because of this, you will find people concentrating on reading the Qur`an, memorizing the Qur`an and enjoying the recitation of the Qur`an moreso.

In Islam, the basic rules of fasting must be fulfilled, meaning to avoid food, fluid and marital relations from dawn to sunset for the month of Ramadan.

On a physical level, these are just some of the differences from a Muslim's daily routine. The believer in order to grow closer to Allah should engage in other acts with vigour; giving charity, praying extra prayers, feeding the poor and needy and reading the Qur`an. Also, the believer should abstain from other acts; lying, engaging in vain talk, wasting time with watching movies or listening to music. Essentially, aiming to become closer to God by behaving as we should behave the whole year round, for Prophet Mohammad said:

"…God has no need for the hunger and the thirst of the person who does not restrain himself from telling lies and acting on them even while observing the fast…"

So, to simply control the physical elements of fasting, and to make no efforts in the spiritual sides has little benefit, illustrated beautifully by Prophet Mohammad when he said:

"…perhaps a fasting person will gain nothing but hunger and thirst…"

Indeed fasting is an act that is between the Individual and God, as no-one knows if you are actually fasting – it is easy to sneak away and have a drink or a snack in secret. Allah was quoted by Prophet Muhammad when he said:

"Every act of Adam's descendants is for themselves, except fasting. It is meant for Me alone, and I will give the reward for it…"



How should onlookers to the Muslim community behave?

Clearly tolerance, respect and understanding builds love between people, so when someone shows care, attention and enthusiasm towards another people, that is often reciprocated back.

Care should be taken during the day while eating, drinking and smoking in public for adults. This means that those working in offices should take lunch behind closed doors, they should think about when and where they drink and refrain from smoking except in private areas.

The Muslim community becomes more aware during the month, so people should be even more careful in how they dress in public, and how they behave publically. Things that are taboo, but have been overlooked at other times probably won`t be overlooked during Ramadan.

Finally you should be aware that your colleagues may be a little more tired, or people may be more hasty to get about at certain times. Due to the religious and social requirements, people may wish to rush to get away from meetings and to a chance to rest, or indeed may be rushing to get away to break their fast with family and friends. This all adds up to people being a little more tired during the month of Ramadan.

Summary

By talking to any Muslim who is fasting, you will find a sense of brotherhood, a sense of community, a sense of the joy of the month of fasting. The whole period is a time of strengthening ties amongst family and friends.

This is because Islam presents a whole life view and has guidelines and commandments on every aspect of existence. There is a clear differentiation between Islam and other views on life. Other religions generally deal with only the spiritual, with no regard for the material aspects of life, while systems such as capitalism and communism only deal with the issues of life, and do not cater for mankind's need for protection of the soul. Furthermore, not only is Islam unique in that it is a complete system of life; it is also one that has been sent to us by the very designer of life, the creator of the universe, Allah.

